



# THE SOCIAL MEDIA RENAISSANCE OF CLASSIC LITERATURE: MEMES, MENTAL HEALTH, AND GEN Z'S ENGAGEMENT WITH KAFKA AND DOSTOEVSKY

SHRAVANTHI G

Department of English  
JAIN(Deemed-To-Be-University), Bangalore

**Abstract :** This paper explores how social media has transformed how literature is consumed, particularly among Gen Z. Literary memes and posts have made classic authors like Franz Kafka and Fyodor Dostoevsky increasingly relatable by highlighting psychological struggles such as existential crises, insecurities, and complex personality and family dynamics- issues that resonate deeply with modern audiences. These authors, once considered distant or difficult, have found new life as figures through whom young people can process their own psychological experiences. This paper explores how these digital interpretations of Kafka and Dostoevsky's works not only engage younger readers but also foster a greater understanding of mental health. The rise of social media platforms as spaces for dialogue about literature has created new ways for these authors to reach audiences, offering a lens through which complex psychological themes are normalized and explored. By bringing these timeless literary figures into contemporary discussions, social media has revived interest in literature, making it relevant to the current generation. A distinct "aesthetic of relatability" has emerged, with platforms like Instagram helping users connect with the psychological depth in these authors' works, turning them into symbols of personal reflection and cultural identity. These digital spaces offer Gen Z a sense of solidarity and recognition, as they see their own struggles mirrored in the characters and themes of these classic works. Through the lens of digital humanities, this paper examines the role of social media in transforming how literature intersects with mental health discourse. It explores how Gen Z's digital engagement with classic texts challenges traditional boundaries, offering new ways to experience and understand literature, while making it a crucial part of the conversation around modern psychological issues. ultimately, the paper highlights the power of social media to shape both literary appreciation and mental health awareness in the digital age.

**Key Words :** Social Media, Gen Z, Mental Health, Digital Humanities, Classic Literature, Literary Memes

## Introduction

This paper examines the rising trend of using social media as a platform for literary engagement, particularly among Generation Z, to explore mental health themes in classic literature. The study focuses on how writers like Franz Kafka and Fyodor Dostoevsky, known for their profound explorations of psychological struggles, have become increasingly relevant to the digitally native generation through platforms like Instagram. For Generation Z, social media serves as a dominant medium for consuming information, news, and entertainment while also providing a critical space for discussing personal issues, including mental health. These platforms have revolutionized how this generation engages with literature, transforming complex narratives into relatable and accessible formats like memes, reels and posts. The role of social media in normalizing conversations around mental health further underscores its importance as a space for reflection and community-building, making it particularly significant for the themes discussed in this paper. Kafka and Dostoevsky, both iconic figures in world literature, are celebrated for their melancholic and psychologically rich works. Their narratives delve deeply into themes such as anxiety, guilt, trauma, parental conflicts, and existential despair- topics that resonate profoundly with Generation Z's lived experiences. For instance, Kafka's exploration of alienation and Dostoevsky's focus on moral and psychological conflict provide fertile ground for Gen Z to process their own struggles with identity, societal expectations, and inner turmoil. As social media facilitates the sharing of favourite books and authors, Kafka and Dostoevsky have emerged as some of the most discussed and celebrated classical writers among Gen Z. The psychological depth of their works creates a safe space for readers to relate, reflect, and explore their own mental health journeys. This paper investigates how this phenomenon has shaped contemporary literary engagement, making these authors not only relevant but also therapeutic for the modern reader.

## Analysis

Generation Z, the first to grow up entirely in the digital age, has never experienced a world without the internet. This defining aspect of their upbringing has profoundly influenced their behavior, communication, and access to information. The internet, initially a tool for communication, has evolved into an omnipresent force that drives education, entertainment, and global interconnectedness. Among its most transformative creations are social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram, which have redefined how Gen Z interacts with the world. In its early days, social media served as a digital photo album—a space to share life events through photos and videos. Over time, it grew into a dynamic cyberspace for creative expression, the dissemination of ideas, and the exchange of knowledge. One significant development during this evolution was the birth of memes. These easily digestible, humorous, and often thought-provoking pieces of content became a language of their own, offering users a way to express likes, dislikes, issues, and cultural observations. For Gen Z, memes act as a bridge to connect with others who share their experiences and ideas. As social media communities expanded, niche interests and hobbies began to flourish in dedicated spaces. Today, countless accounts, pages, and groups cater to specific tastes. Among these, literary-themed spaces have emerged as a significant cultural phenomenon. These pages introduce their audiences to a world of literature—ranging from classic texts to contemporary works—through engaging and creative formats. Posts, reels, and memes about literature serve as gateways for Gen Z users, many of whom might not have previously considered exploring classical authors. Social media thus functions as an effective medium to revive interest in literature, making it more accessible and appealing to a generation that thrives on visually engaging and relatable content. Moreover, these platforms have transcended their entertainment function to become essential spaces for discussing personal and societal issues. Mental health, a topic closely tied to literature, has found a prominent place in these discussions. Gen Z often uses social media to explore and share their struggles, making it an effective tool to connect literature with contemporary issues. Literary accounts take advantage of this, posting content that highlights the psychological themes in various works, helping users understand and reflect on their mental health. For Gen Z, social media is more than entertainment; it is their primary source of news, knowledge, and cultural exchange. By engaging with literary-themed pages, they are exposed to works, authors, and ideas that resonate with their experiences and challenges. This intersection between social media and literature has created a unique ecosystem where literature gains relevance by connecting with the emotional and intellectual needs of the generation. Social media platforms provide not just exposure but also an interactive way to discuss, critique, and share books and literary figures, thereby fostering a deeper connection with literature. This phenomenon has been particularly impactful in popularizing authors such as Franz Kafka and Fyodor Dostoevsky. These writers, known for their deeply melancholic and introspective works, delve into themes of anxiety, guilt, trauma, and other psychological complexities. Their works align with the struggles of Gen Z, making them relatable and accessible to a digital generation seeking to understand their mental health and societal roles. The visual and textual creativity of social media content brings these timeless themes into the modern age, offering Gen Z both a space to engage and a means to reflect. By studying this dynamic relationship, we can better understand how the internet, particularly social media, has not only shaped Gen Z's engagement with literature but also provided them with a powerful tool to explore and share ideas, making classical literature an integral part of their lives.

### *Kafka's letter to his father and 'Metamorphosis'*

Franz Kafka is an iconic literary figure whose works have continued to resonate deeply with readers, particularly with Generation Z. Known for his exploration of complex psychological themes, Kafka's works transcend time, offering profound insight into the human psyche. His literature delves into anxiety, isolation, guilt, trauma, and authority—issues that have become increasingly relevant for today's readers. Kafka's unique approach to the absurdity of human existence, combined with his exploration of psychological turmoil, has earned him a place among the most influential writers of the 20th century. The term "Kafkaesque" has evolved into a cultural touchstone that is widely used to describe situations marked by an overwhelming sense of absurdity, helplessness, or disorientation. However, in modern times, the word "Kafkaesque" has also taken on a more personal, psychological dimension, especially within Gen Z circles. On social media platforms, the "Kafkaesque aesthetic" has emerged as a lens through which young people interpret their own struggles with mental health. This aesthetic revolves around the idea of relating oneself to Kafka's personal crises—anxiety, insecurity, trauma, and a sense of existential dread. Among Kafka's works, *Letters to His Father* stands out as one of the most significant texts that has found renewed relevance on social media. In these letters, Kafka provides a raw, unfiltered account of his turbulent relationship with his father, Hermann Kafka, whose strict, authoritarian nature stifled his emotional and psychological growth. Kafka's letters are filled with deep disillusionment and frustration, as he attempts to articulate the emotional scars left by his father's domineering behavior. One of the most poignant quotes from the letters reveals Kafka's sense of abandonment and inadequacy: *"You are a father to me in the same way that a criminal is a judge to his victim."* This statement encapsulates Kafka's perception of his father as a figure of power and control who left him with an unshakable feeling of guilt and alienation.

Another striking excerpt from Kafka's letters reads: *"I have spent my whole life trying to escape from the shadow of my father, but I cannot free myself."* This quote speaks to the deep psychological conflict Kafka experienced in his lifelong struggle with his father's rejection and emotional neglect. For Gen Z, the modern psychological term "daddy issues"—which refers to unresolved emotional or psychological struggles related to one's father figure—has become a widely used term. Kafka's letters to his father resonate with Gen Z because they see in his words a mirror of their own feelings of insecurity, rejection, and frustration. Gen Z, as the first generation to openly discuss mental health issues and share personal experiences online, finds solace and a sense of connection in Kafka's writings. The term "daddy issues," which encompasses a range of emotional struggles related to the father-child relationship, has become an accessible shorthand for many of the complex emotions that Gen Z grapples with. These issues, whether they involve feelings of abandonment, rejection, or lack of emotional support, are starkly mirrored in Kafka's life and works. In this way, Kafka's personal trauma becomes a shared experience that transcends time, offering a sense of solidarity and understanding to those who feel similarly misunderstood or emotionally neglected. On social media, this shared experience has evolved into a trend. Gen Z uses memes, reels, and posts to reflect on Kafka's letters, making them not only relatable but also accessible to a wider audience. Through these digital platforms, the "Kafkaesque aesthetic" is embraced as a form of self-expression—an avenue for young people to navigate their personal struggles while paying homage to Kafka's timeless exploration of the human condition. In this way, Kafka's work has found new life as a safe space where Gen Z can confront their own emotional turmoil. By turning Kafka's deeply personal letters into relatable content, they not only give voice to their own experiences but also promote his literature, creating a bridge between two generations and fostering a dialogue on the shared complexities of mental health. Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis* is one of his most iconic works, often discussed on Gen Z social media platforms through memes, reels, and posts. The text resonates deeply

with today's generation, not only because of its psychological themes but also due to the sense of alienation and isolation it conveys. The metaphor of Gregor Samsa turning into a giant insect has become a central theme in the "Kafka Aesthetic" adopted by many young readers. In *Metamorphosis*, Gregor's transformation into a bug causes him to feel like a burden, an outcast, and an obstacle in his family's life. His inability to serve his family in the way he once did leads to feelings of worthlessness and alienation. Gregor's alienation is not only physical—due to his new form—but emotional as well. He is unable to communicate effectively and is increasingly ignored and isolated by those around him. Gen Z often identifies with this alienation, as many feel disconnected from their peers and from societal expectations. The notion of feeling "out of place" is one that frequently appears in Gen Z's discussions of their mental health. Many young people today experience depression, anxiety, and confusion, often struggling with finding a sense of belonging in the modern world. Kafka's portrayal of Gregor's internal struggle in *Metamorphosis* mirrors these issues. As Gregor reflects on his alienation, he feels like a "nuisance" to his family, disconnected from those around him—this is a sentiment that many Gen Z readers express when they share memes or personal stories online.

A famous quote from *Metamorphosis* that encapsulates Gregor's sense of alienation is:

*"I cannot make any further progress in this bed. There is nothing to be done. I am a burden to everyone"*. This quote, among others, exemplifies the profound emotional isolation Gregor faces, something Gen Z relates to in their own struggles with societal pressures and mental health issues. Moreover, *Metamorphosis* explores themes of absurdism, another concept that resonates strongly with Gen Z. Absurdism, a philosophical outlook that argues life is inherently meaningless, is mirrored in the existential confusion and emotional despair that Gregor experiences. Gen Z often engages with absurdist ideas through memes, posts, and reels, finding humor in existential anxiety and absurd situations. The notion of the meaningless or nonsensical world aligns with the pervasive sense of uncertainty and chaos that many members of Gen Z feel. The "Kafka Aesthetic" on social media includes memes and posts that visualize and embody the sense of alienation and emotional distancing seen in *Metamorphosis*. Young readers use these memes not only to discuss their own struggles but also to promote Kafka's work in a modern, accessible way. Memes often feature the metaphor of being a bug, feeling like a "nuisance" or "out of place" in a world they don't fully understand. This cultural appropriation of Kafka's themes on social media is a way for Gen Z to normalize their struggles and find solidarity in shared experiences. In this way, *Metamorphosis* has transcended its original literary context, becoming a cultural touchstone for Gen Z's exploration of isolation, alienation, and mental health. It serves as a bridge, bringing classic literature into the realm of modern discourse, helping young people see themselves in Gregor's journey, while promoting the continued relevance of Kafka's work to today's digital and social landscape. By engaging with *Metamorphosis* in such a way, Gen Z not only validates their own feelings of alienation and isolation but also contributes to the larger conversation around mental health, proving that classic literature remains an important space for self-reflection and dialogue in the contemporary world.

### ***Dostoevsky's Raskolnikov- a paradox of god complex and self-doubt***

Rodion Raskolnikov, the protagonist of Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, embodies a psychological paradox that mirrors many challenges faced by Gen Z. On one hand, he harbors a god complex—a belief in his moral superiority and intellectual brilliance that justifies his drastic actions. This is seen in his justification for murdering the pawnbroker, where he convinces himself that eliminating "lesser" people can lead to societal betterment. Yet, this self-perceived superiority collapses under the weight of guilt, anxiety, and self-doubt, leading to a mental breakdown. This contradiction is strikingly familiar to Gen Z. Social media has amplified a culture of self-branding and confidence, often creating spaces for individuals to present themselves as highly capable and unique. However, beneath this surface, many members of Gen Z grapple with insecurities, impostor syndrome, and mental health struggles like anxiety and depression. Like Raskolnikov, they feel immense pressure to define their worth while simultaneously wrestling with doubt about their place in the world. Raskolnikov's sense of isolation also connects with Gen Z's experiences. In an era dominated by online interactions, many young people report feelings of loneliness and detachment. Raskolnikov isolates himself from friends and family, believing that his "higher purpose" sets him apart, but this isolation becomes suffocating. This mirrors how Gen Z might feel alienated by their ambitions, societal expectations, or internal struggles. +Raskolnikov's moral dilemmas—his oscillation between justification for his crime and his overwhelming guilt—reflect the heightened ethical consciousness of Gen Z. As a generation more attuned to social justice, many Gen Z individuals deeply analyze their decisions and actions, often spiraling into overthinking and moral anxiety. They might see their own tendencies to overanalyze, self-criticize, or feel paralyzed by guilt reflected in Raskolnikov's internal torment. Memes about Raskolnikov highlight these contradictions in humorous and relatable ways. For instance, memes emphasizing his god complex ("*I am above everyone*") juxtaposed with his depressive episodes ("*I am nothing but a worm*") encapsulate the internal conflicts many Gen Z individuals experience. This ability to find humor and solidarity in such complexities demonstrates how classic literature like *Crime and Punishment* continues to provide a mirror for modern struggles. Raskolnikov's character has become a focal point in social media discussions and memes, making *Crime and Punishment* accessible to a generation that might not have otherwise encountered Dostoevsky. Memes portraying Raskolnikov's inner turmoil have turned him into a cultural icon for Gen Z readers, drawing parallels between his existential crises and the generation's own struggles with identity, purpose, and mental health.

### ***Kafka, Dostoevsky and the gen z woman***

A noticeable pattern emerges on social media platforms that post literary memes and reels about writers like Franz Kafka and Fyodor Dostoevsky: the majority of participants in these online literary groups are women. Interestingly, Kafka and Dostoevsky have become unexpected icons of womanhood in these spaces. Readers often attribute modern Gen Z terminology to these writers, affectionately referring to them as "baby girl." They also frame them through a gendered lens, humorously stating, "He is just a girl," thereby aligning their struggles and characters with the female experience. This association stems from the thematic parallels between the emotional depth of these writers' works and the realities of modern womanhood. Kafka and Dostoevsky's literature delves into themes of existential dread, alienation, insecurity, and the psychological toll of societal expectations. These themes resonate deeply with female readers, who see reflections of their own struggles with mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, self-doubt, and insecurities—many of which are exacerbated by the systemic injustices faced by women in society. Both writers, though not directly addressing the female experience, explore emotional and psychological landscapes that align with the experiences of female rage, vulnerability, and resilience in a patriarchal world. As a result, they are celebrated by Gen Z women as literary figures whose works closely mirror the emotional and mental health struggles tied to womanhood. By embracing these writers in this light, modern readers have redefined Kafka and Dostoevsky as symbols of solidarity and understanding,

bridging the gap between classical literature and contemporary gendered experiences. This reimagining of their identities underscores the power of literature to transcend its original context and find new relevance in modern social and cultural discourses, particularly among younger generations navigating complex personal and societal challenges.

### **Conclusion**

The relationship between Gen Z and the works of Franz Kafka and Fyodor Dostoevsky reveals the transformative power of social media in bridging classical literature with modern struggles. This paper has demonstrated how Gen Z's unique challenges—mental health issues, self-doubt, psychological complexities, and the search for meaning—align with the themes explored in the writings of these iconic authors. Through platforms that foster relatability and meme culture, Gen Z has reclaimed these literary giants, making them symbols of personal and collective exploration. Social media's role as a cultural bridge has revitalized interest in Kafka and Dostoevsky, introducing their works to audiences who might not have engaged with classical literature otherwise. By framing these authors within the context of modern struggles, Gen Z has created a space where literature becomes a tool for self-reflection, emotional expression, and communal connection. The resonance of Kafka's alienation and Dostoevsky's psychological conflicts highlights the timelessness of their works. This shared ground between their narratives and Gen Z's lived experiences fosters a deeper understanding of how literature continues to address the human condition. In embracing these authors as icons of relatability and even symbols of modern identity, Gen Z showcases the enduring ability of literature to evolve alongside societal changes, reaffirming its role in shaping personal and cultural dialogues.

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